Introduction: How did the American state consolidate its power over the vast and remote territory of the western United States? This chapter orients readers to the period of western expansion spanning the 1860s to the early 1900s and the crucial, often unseen, role of the US Post within this project. It explains the book's methodology of using a dataset of more than one hundred thousand post offices to map the spread of the western postal network, part of a larger approach of digital history. This spatial analysis leads to four findings about the US Post and its status as a "gossamer network": that it was big, spatially expansive, fast moving, and ephemeral. The chapter then introduces the concept of the agency model, a new organizational framework for understanding the American state. It concludes with an overview of the book's chapter structure, major themes, and narrative strategies.

Chapter 1: Geography and State Power - situates the US Post within the larger landscape of the 19th-century American state. Analyzing the geography of the US Post challenges traditional assumptions about how states are organized and the ways in which they exercise power. First, rather than functioning as a centralized bureaucracy, the US Post operated through the agency model: a decentralized organization in which small tasks are delegated to a scattered workforce of part-time local agents. Second, rather than exercising coercive power, the US Post operated through structural power, or the ability to shape the conditions under which people make decisions. Rather than weaknesses, these features were key to how the US Post was able to rapidly expand over recently conquered territory and, in doing so, tie together the machinery of governance and settler colonization in the western United States.

Chapter 2: Stories and structures - follows the story of four siblings as they migrated westward and the role of the US Post in their lives. From the time they were orphaned as children in Ohio, the postal network connected Sarah, Jamie, Delia, and Benjamin Curtis across space. The Curtis siblings joined a migratory wave of people that washed across the western United States during the late 19th century. No matter where they moved, from a railway line on the central plains to a mill town in northern California to a backcountry ranch in Arizona, they could rely on the US Post's expansive infrastructure to communicate with each other. Across dozens of surviving letters, the US Post's structural power comes into focus, giving meaning to how its institutional arrangements and wider geography shaped everyday experiences and conditions in the 19th-century West.

Chapter 3: Postal Maps 1860-83 - During the 1860s and 1870s the US Post underwent a period of breakneck, unstable expansion in the western United States. Chapter 3 details the efforts of postal administrators to track all of these changes through a new mapmaking initiative under a cartographer named Walter Nicholson. The Topographer's Office offers a window into the efforts of government officials in Washington, DC, to administer the nation's western periphery. Nicholson's postal maps were highly sought after across the federal government, offering valuable spatial information about the region that was often in short supply. Yet the struggles of Nicholson and his employees to keep pace with the never-ending flurry of changes to the region's postal network is a testament to the ongoing barriers to centralized oversight imposed by the geography of the American West.

Chapter 4: Mail Routes and the Costs of Expansion 1866–83 - examines the transportation of mail in the western United States. During the 1860s and 1870s the Post Office Department contracted with private stagecoach companies to carry the mail on its behalf, allowing it to extend mail routes across the region without establishing its own costly public infrastructure. Government mail contracts effectively subsidized the western stagecoach industry and facilitated the region's breakneck growth during these decades. But staging companies began to lobby, collude, and bribe their way into exorbitant contracts worth millions of dollars, and by the end of the 1870s the situation had devolved into a full-fledged institutional crisis. This chapter is a story about mismanagement, fraud, and corruption, but it also speaks to the federal government's lack of centralized administrative capacity. The decentralized agency model may have allowed the US Post to rapidly spread across the West, but this frenetic regional expansion project came with considerable cost.

Chapter 5: The Post Office Window 1880–92 - focuses on the role of post offices and post-masters in western towns during the 1880s. Small-town post offices exemplified the US Post's localized agency model at work, offering a much different perspective on the history of the American state than a traditional bureaucratic framework. Post offices defined the spatial practices of local communities. Whoever housed the post office on their premises enjoyed a regular stream of potential customers into their place of business. This made post-master appointments highly sought-after positions that provided the main source of political patronage for whichever party controlled the presidency. There was no clear division between public and private space in local post offices, as postmasters simultaneously ran stores, sold magazine subscriptions, and acted as agents for telegraph and express companies. Finally, the agency model meant that post offices operated with little administrative oversight and routinely frustrated attempts at centralized reform.

Chapter 6: Money Orders and National Integration 1864–95 - traces the expansion of the postal money order system between the 1860s and 1890s, a service that allowed people to send small sums of money safely and cheaply through the mail. This chapter offers another counterpoint to assumptions about the inevitable tides of bureaucratization and national integration in the 19th-century West. First, unlike much of the US Post, the money order system was a centralized bureaucracy, managed by a career technocrat named Charles Macdonald. But Macdonald's efficient management was predicated on limiting its spatial coverage to a relatively small number of western post offices. Second, money orders allowed westerners to conduct long-distance transactions that helped integrate them into a national consumer market. Mapping where the residents of one western town actually sent money orders during the 1890s reveals the unexpected pattern that despite an age of nationalizing forces, their remittances stayed largely within a regional orbit.

Chapter 7: Rural Free Delivery 1896–1913 - In the 1890s and early 1900s, the Post Office Department launched an unprecedented spatial reorganization of its postal network: Rural Free Delivery, when mail carriers started delivering mail to the doorsteps of individual homes. Chapter 7 details the rollout of Rural Free Delivery, which was put into motion through an alliance between department administrators and agrarian reformers. This initiative triggered a spatial and administrative shift in the US Post, as it altered the geography of the network while ushering in a more recognizably modern bureaucracy made up of professional civil servants. But mapping the spread of the service reveals that Rural Free Delivery did not initially extend to the rural West. There, the older agency model would continue to define mail service well into the twentieth century.

Conclusion: This concluding chapter offers an overview of the US Post and the wider federal government from the early 1900s to the present. Both the US Post and the American state became more centralized and bureaucratic during the 20th century, but elements of the agency model and the challenges of American geography have continued to shape governance through the present. Today, the federal government's "indirect" workforce outnumbers its "direct" workforce of salaried employees, while the US Postal Service's ongoing fiscal crisis has seen the re-emergence of elements of the 19th-century postal network and its localized, semi-privatized workforce. The book concludes with lessons that the 19th-century postal system holds for understanding the kind of structural power wielded by technology companies and other large-scale forces that shape American society today.

From Oxford University Press

Sonntag, den 17.7.2022